

A National Agenda for the Environment and the Aging

**Comments by
James E. Birren**

There are three areas of responsibility for the health and well-being of older persons: 1) government, 2) families, and 3) the older individual, him- or herself. Many conditions of health in the later years are the result of the accumulation of relatively irreversible damage from earlier life exposure. It is my understanding that chronic obstructive pulmonary disease is heavily influenced by exposure to smoking, atmospheric pollution for noxious gases, and dust and carbon exhaust particles. The lung diseases are the fourth most common cause of death and affect 15-million people. The lung conditions are not simply the expression of late-life health and frailty but the product of growing up and growing old in polluted environments. Increasingly, the responsibility of government should be expressed in supporting research that will lead to understanding the long-term causal chains between exposure to toxic environments and disease and death in the later years. Also, government should develop and enforce policies for environmental pollution that will reduce the morbidity and mortality of older persons.

Falls are a major factor in the disability and deaths of older persons. Family members should take a more active role in examining the conditions of housing for their older family members. Lack of stairway hand railings and bathtub grab bars, loose carpeting and exposed cords are major contributors to disabilities. Families and caregivers should initiate inspection of the environments of older persons. The EPA could assist this process with publications that illustrate home and public hazardous conditions and environmental factors and also suggestions for improvements and risk reduction.

In addition, older persons have a responsibility for improving their health and protecting themselves from environmental hazards. It is suggested that the EPA take steps to inform older persons about reducing health risks. The EPA could initiate a relevant publication series, including texts and videos. It is surprising that there are many widely sold publications related to computer use but little on human physiology. A publication series should be developed on "Your Responsibility for Your Health", and "Understanding the Body", and "Health for Dummies".

Such publications would not only improve the understanding of the vital organs of the body and their functions, but also encourage older persons to take initiatives in improving their health and avoiding environmental hazards. Further actions could emerge in the volunteering of older persons to improve the quality of life of the elderly in American communities. The EPA should initiate relevant networking with the national non-profit agencies and organizations that are concerned with the well being of older persons.

Take steps to reduce the effects of the Age-Related conditions on society, families and individuals
what can be done to help the elderly in the future